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DRL FOR A/S DAVID KRAMER, WENDY SILVERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER DISCUSSES THE
GOVERNMENT'S MEDIA DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Head of the President's Socio-Political Department Ali Hasanov described for the Ambassador a highly successful and productive visit to the United States in August, including attendance at the Democratic National Convention in Denver and meetings in Washington, DC. Hasanov pledged to improve cooperation and build partnerships with the USG and NGOs, and stated that "the chapter is closed" on previous arguments with the National Democratic Institute. Highlighting his talks with DRL A/S David Kramer, Hasanov said that Azerbaijan's NGO fund had been successfully launched and a mass media development program, aimed at creating a "professional press corps," was being developed. An additional program to develop political parties would follow. Hasanov suggested that Azerbaijan's three imprisoned journalists would be pardoned after the October 15 presidential elections, which he insisted would be free and fair. ENEMO, however, will not receive an invitation to observe. End Summary

Bilateral Relations

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by USAID Director and Polecon Chief, met September 11 with Ali Hasanov, Director of the Presidential Administration's Social-Political Department, to discuss his recent travels to the United States, where he attended the Democratic National Convention in Denver and had meetings in Washington with policymakers and NGOs. Hasanov said that the purpose of his trip, which he described as highly productive and useful, was to share information on the current domestic situation in Azerbaijan, including upcoming presidential elections, and to solicit views on future cooperation with the United States.

¶3. (C) Hasanov said further that he hoped to promote friendlier relations with the United States and build partnerships. Azerbaijan, he said, is striving to meet "U.S. standards" on human rights and democracy, and vowed that Azerbaijan would fulfill its international commitments, including the conduct of free and fair elections. He asked for the United States to weigh in more strongly to help Azerbaijan solve its problems, particularly in light of recent events in the Caucasus. He applauded his lengthy discussion with NDI's Ken Wallach, saying "the chapter is closed" with respect to previous tensions between NDI and the GOAJ.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador noted Vice President Richard Cheney's recent visit to Baku and highlighted his speech on U.S.-Russia relations at Lake Como. She also pointed to the recent testimonies of EUR A/S Daniel Fried and DAS Bryza as key indicators of "where we are right now" in terms of

developments in the region. Regarding Hasanov's U.S. travel, the Ambassador said that the Embassy encouraged the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) to coordinate the visit.

Meeting with Assistant Secretary David Kramer

15. (C) Hasanov called his Washington meetings "very important," and highlighted his discussion of democracy and human rights with A/S David Kramer. In that meeting, Hasanov tried to emphasize that "Azerbaijan is developing political parties and a democratic process," with discussion taking place on a draft law on party organization and financing. He noted that NGOs and "international donors" are welcome to contribute to this process.

16. (C) Hasanov called Azerbaijan's state-sponsored NGO fund, launched earlier this year with Embassy and USAID input, a success. Multiple organizations -- some friendly towards the government, others not so much so -- have received small grants, with \$1.4 million distributed in total. Hasanov noted that Azerbaijan must improve relations between the government and civil society, and expand outreach to implementers, including U.S.-based NGOs. He thanked the USG for its assistance, through USAID, in development of the NGO program and said he would welcome further support to develop the media program, as well as a future project on development of political parties.

Release of Journalists

17. (C) The U.S. side, according to Hasanov, showed particular interest in human rights and alleged political prisoners. The Ambassador re-emphasized the importance of Azerbaijan's timely release of three journalists, who are widely believed to be imprisoned for political reasons, and the continuing need for action to address the complaints of RFE/RL journalists in Nakhchivan. Hasanov, as in Washington, suggested that the journalists would be released after the October 15 presidential elections. The Ambassador outlined again USG interest in a presidential statement opposing violence against journalists and GOAJ action to investigate cases, as well as a re-examination of the libel law.

Media Fund - USG Welcome to Advise

18. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's questions, Hasanov said that President Aliyev had signed a "Mass Media Concept Paper" in July, and the Government was now tasked with formulating a media development strategy, including a fund to support commercial publications and journalists. The "level of professionalism" within Azerbaijan's press corps "is not impressive," Hasanov said. The strategy will incorporate three main principles: 1) the State must create an environment in which media can work independently and profitably; obstacles to commercial work must be removed; 2) Azerbaijan must develop a "professional press corps," with a "code of conduct based on international principles"; and 3) the GOAJ must find mechanisms to differentiate "good and bad media," perhaps by offering incentives or rewards for responsible journalism.

19. (C) On the final point, the Ambassador noted that the GOAJ must be careful not to overplay the government's hand by offering "a seal of approval." Such an effort would undermine the media's independence and credibility. Hasanov said he understood, and requested USG assistance in drawing up the parameters for the mass media fund, as the Embassy and USAID had for the NGO program. He also noted that Azerbaijan's Press Council and various editors-in-chief had drafted the concept paper.

Freedom of Assembly Still Untested

¶10. (C) The Ambassador noted that Azerbaijan's new freedom of assembly law looked good on paper, but its effectiveness would depend on implementation. The City of Baku earlier in the week had published a list of eleven sites around the city where demonstrations could legally take place. Those sites, however, appeared to be located in remote areas or places hard to access (septel). The Ambassador suggested that a few centrally located sites should be designated as a sign of goodwill. Hasanov said that the published list was preliminary and that other sites would later be identified.

Elections: No ENEMO Invitation

¶12. (C) The Ambassador said that the U.S. Embassy's goal during the election season would be to provide an objective assessment of Azerbaijan's October 15 presidential elections. Free and fair elections, she said, would provide Azerbaijan with an excellent opportunity to improve its image and build confidence. The Ambassador asked Hasanov to describe his discussions in Washington related to the elections, and requested an update on the GOAJ's thinking on election monitoring by the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO). Hasanov said he had discussed this issue with NDI, explaining that Azerbaijan had already invited OSCE/ODIHR as an overall coordinator for international election monitoring efforts. OSCE in turn, he said, could invite other groups to participate within the ODIHR framework, including ENEMO. The Ambassador noted that ENEMO would not likely fit within ODIHR, as it usually works independently. Hasanov repeated that ENEMO or other organizations would not receive a separate invitation for election monitoring activities. Hasanov also reconfirmed that the Election Monitoring Center, a domestic NGO, would be able to participate in election monitoring, even without official registration.

Comment

¶13. (C) Ali Hasanov is one of the prickliest figures that the Embassy deals with in the President's office. This

uncharacteristically positive meeting with Hasanov, including his welcome indication that relations with NDI are on a new track, suggests that his discussions in Washington and Denver, and perhaps more importantly the attention and respect paid to him, had an effect. It has certainly changed his tone dramatically on NDI and its programs in Azerbaijan. Hasanov may be reflective of broader sentiments in Azerbaijan -- a discomfort with some Western approaches on democracy, but with a desire for acknowledgement and affirmation from the West. It's the Rodney Dangerfield view of the world.
DERSE